DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 457 PS 016 208

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TITLE [Prepared Statement of Heather Bastow Weiss at the Hearing on the Diversity and Strength of American Families, U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (Washington, D.C., February 25, 1986).]
PUB DATE 25 Feb 86
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Programs; *Family Programs; Local Issues; *Policy Formation; Prevention; *Public Policy; Research Needs; *Social Influences; *Social Support Groups
IDENTIFIERS *Program Characteristics

ABSTRACT

To assess the nature and importance of family support and education programs which have increased in number during the last decade, this prepared statement addresses three questions: (1) What is known about the ways in which context, defined as factors outside the nuclear family, affects a family's capacity to rear its children and build a fulfilling family life? (2) What are the main characteristics of family support and education programs and how do they strengthen, reinforce, and empower families? (3) Do such programs offer a common ground on which policy makers from a variety of perspectives can stand in order to promote the development of children and families? It is argued that the steady proliferation of family support and education programs from the grass-roots level, rather than from the federal level, reflects a systemic reaction to the paradox that contemporary families are faced with increasing stress at the same time that they are asked to assume a larger role in the care of dependents. It is further argued that these family support and education programs also reflect broader national debates about social policy for families in that they ask: What can governmental and other community institutions do to enhance the family's capacity to help itself and others? A reference list of over 30 items is included. (RH)

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ED277457

PS 016203

The past dozen years have seen the proliferation of family support and education programs in a wide variety of settings, including schools, drop-in centers, homes, churches, hospitals, and community centers. As the title of a recent resource guide describing these programs suggests, they are designed as Programs to Strengthen Families (Zigler, Weiss, & Kagan, 1983). Underlying these programs is the ecological principle that while the family is the primary institution shaping a child's development, family support and education programs can effectively promote development by helping parents to provide the best possible environment for the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Travers & Light, 1982). These family- as opposed to child-oriented programs aim to achieve a variety of interrelated ends, including the enhancement of child health and development, prevention of various child and family dysfunctions such as abuse and neglect, the enhancement of parental knowledge, self-esteem, and communication, and the promotion of increased informal and formal community support for families.

These typically grass-roots programs provide social support as social support researchers define this concept (Cleary, in press): They supply information (e. g., about child health and development, parenting skills, family communication); emotional support (e. g., attention, reinforcement, and feedback for adults in their family roles); and instrumental assistance (e. g., transportation, referrals to other services). The more interpersonal

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definition of social support set forth by Cobb (1976) in fact captures some of the feelings expressed by participants in these programs, to wit: That the program has reinforced the sense that they are "cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and part of a network of communication and mutual obligation." (p. 300)

To take the measure of these programs and indicate the central place they have for those considering the issue of how to strengthen families, this statement addresses three questions:

1. What do we know about the ways in which context, defined as factors outside the nuclear family, affect a family's capacity to rear their children and build a fulfilling family life--in short, in the Beatles's terms--do we get by with a little help from our friends?

2. What are the main characteristics of family support and education programs and how do they strengthen, reinforce, and empower families?

3. Do these programs offer a common ground on which policy makers from a variety of perspectives can stand in order to promote the development of children and families?

Do We Get By With A Little Help From Our Friends? And Family, Neighbors, Co-Workers, etc.

An increasing number of studies point to the key role played by informal support systems in sustaining family life. Examining this research it is clear that one's extended family continues to be a major and often preferred

source of many kinds of assistance. In her study of working mothers in single- and two-parent families, Kamerman found, for example, that

> . . .although they frequently mention neighbors or friends as providing important help, it is clear from the interviews that the single most important source of help for working mothers are relatives and family. Whether for child care purposes, emergencies, advice, or just encouragement and sympathy, most of these women view 'family' as an essential support system. . . .(1980, p. 108)

More than a decade ago, Hill and his colleagues (Hill, Foote, Aldous, Carlson, & Macdonald, 1970) studied approximately 300 families distributed across three generations: grandparents, parents, and children. The results provide impressive evidence indicating the degree to which family members help one another. When Hill added exchanges with extended family members such as siblings and cousins, kin exchanges accounted for 70% of all reported instances of help. When families were asked where they preferred to turn for assistance in a crisis, each generation's first choice was kin. Carol Stack (1974) documented the ways in which a community of poor black families and friends helped one another. She found that kin, and non-kin regarded as kin, built a cooperative and independent network engaging in a complex and long-term pattern of reciprocity and exchange that allowed them to survive severe economic deprivation. Similarly, in her study of 305 middle-class black families, McAdoo (1978) found that kin were the most important source of help.

A growing body of research on child development, families, and social support indicates the important role played not only by family, but also by friends, co-workers, neighbors, acquaintances, etc. both for everyday family functioning and in coping with crises. Informal support has been shown to figure in such diverse areas as: Locating and assessing child care (Collins and Pancoast, 1976), the adjustment of children following divorce (Hetherington, 1981), the ease of pregnancy and delivery (Norbeck & Tilden, 1983) and in the successful adjustment of families with handicapped children (Bristol, 1984). The lack of social support, or what Garbarino and Sherman (1980) refer to as "social impoverishment"--few social relationships and exchanges with others and the perception that help would not be forthcoming if needed--has been related to higher incidents of child abuse and neglect.

It is not news that supportive interactions are important for human health and development; "what is new," as Cobb (1976) points out, "is the assembling of hard evidence that adequate social support can protect people in crises from a wide variety of pathological states: from low birthweight to death, from arthritis through tuberculosis to depression, alcoholism and other psychiatric illness" (p. 310). Child development researchers, family sociologists, and family support and education program evaluators are currently mapping the complex ways in which informal support directly and indirectly affects internal family functioning in areas such as maternal-child interaction, parenting attitudes and adult self-esteem (for a review of this research see Weiss & Jacobs, 1983; Cochran & Brassard, 1979). Social support research is in its infancy, and we have only the most primitive sense of the contribution of support to family coping and well-being. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence that informal, naturally-occurring support from family

and friends plays an important role in developing and maintaining strong families.

It is also clear that informal social support is unevenly distributed and that it is sometimes unavailable or insufficient. For example, in her research on teenage mothers and their infants, Crockenberg (1984) found that social support had positive effects on mother-child interaction only for those mothers with relatively little stress in their lives. As she concludes, "One implication of this analysis may be that the extraordinarily high levels of stress in particular populations cannot be ameliorated by the type of support usually provided by families." (p. 22). Increased stress on all families and greater geographic mobility and isolation have had negative effects on supportive social ties. It is harder for everybody, and impossible for some, to get by simply with naturally-occurring informal support.

One grass-roots response to this has been the recent proliferation of family support and education programs in the form of drop-in centers, parent support groups, home visit programs, information and referral services, warmlines, etc. These preventive programs and the emerging family support movement of which they are a part, exemplify an emerging new paradigm for the human services, one undergirded by "the principle that the [present] need is to create formal support systems that generate and strengthen informal support systems, that in turn reduce the need for the formal system." (Bronfenbrenner & Weiss, 1983, p. 405).

The family support movement includes thousands of programs building on family strengths and providing a variety of kinds of formal and informal information and support. These programs range from Parents Place, a drop-in center for parents with children under five housed in a church in White

Plains, New York, to much more intensive services such as those provided by the Prenatal and Early Infancy home visit project for high-risk young mothers upstate in Elmira, NY. As a recent national program survey conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project (see attachments for a summary of some survey results) shows, these programs offer a variety of services at the core of which are parent and child development education, networking and opportunities for parents and sometimes families to meet one another, and information and referral to other services. Another important aspect of these programs is their grass-roots nature--they are carefully grounded in local needs, resources, and circumstances. As a result, they are diverse and difficult to classify, but the majority do share some overarching characteristics and common operating assumptions.

Common Characteristics and Methods of Empowerment

Family support and education programs reflect the trend toward more family- rather than individually-focussed intervention efforts. They are family-oriented in that they attempt to work with the family as a whole or because they provide support to people in their family roles. They recognize the stresses and strains and the rewards of family life and offer assistance grounded in the family's own efforts and strengths. Interviews with mothers in one such program indicate that in addition to providing valuable child development and parenting information, they also offered the mothers the opportunity to ventilate problems and to receive praise and reinforcement for their parenting efforts. Many shape their interventions to promote adult and family as well as child development. These programs underscore the interdependent relationship between family and community while at the same

time attempting to frame this relationship in such a way as to support and respect the family's role and prerogatives.

They do this in many ways, one of the foremost of which involves qualities inherent in their relationship with parents.

> Services for young children and families can be viewed as varying along a continuum with respect to sources of support and the relationship between the parents and those who work with them. This continuum ranges from a unilateral relationship between the parent and a professional source of assistance (wherein the parent is viewed as the passive recipient of professional expertise) through bilateral relationships between parents and professionals (wherein the parent is seen seen as a partner with his or her own expertise about the child) to more multilateral arrangements whereby information and support comes from professionals, peers, and other sources of informal support (wherein the parent is both the recipient and provider of support to others through peer support and informal helping arrangements. (Zigler & Weiss, 1985, pp. 171-192.)

These programs have attempted to incorporate a non-deficit service philosophy whereby professionals do things not <u>to</u> but <u>with</u> parents. In their emphasis on self/mutual help and building informal support, these programs express the view that families can do a great deal for themselves and for each other. As a result, they are not replacing but rather redefining the roles of professionals and more formal support services (See Whittaker, 1985 for a discussion of their impact on child welfare services).

The programs emphasize prevention and enhancement rather than remediation. As knowledge about the antecedents of child health and development, family stability and coping and effective parenting accumulates through both research and practice, these programs are building on it to develop interventions designed to prevent a variety of child and family problems. They premised on the view that they are likely to be cost-effective because they reduce the need for later, more financially and costly interventions. They typically make judicious use of professional expertise and often couple it with volunteers and/or peers in a variety of roles from lay home visitor to parent group participant, warmline volunteer and volunteer group leaders.

Minnesota Early Learning Design, an education and support program for new parents, is a good example. Professionals train experienced parents to serve as volunteer leaders in new parent groups. The professionals provide training and backup services, but the majority of the work is done by non-professional volunteers. The Prenatal/Early Infancy Project in New York is staffed by nurse home visitors, but in addition to the services they provide, they encourage new single mothers to identify and develop their own informal networks so they have someone to turn to if parenting becomes overwhelming (Olds, 1981). The Family Matters Project in its work in Syracuse, New York, operationalized a non-deficit family empowerment approach through both home visits and the development of neighborhood-based family support groups. The home visitors elicited ideas of things to do with children from parents and in turn wrote them up for all project parents. The groups shared experiences and lobbied for neighborhood improvements, such as fencing for a dangerous creek.

Family support and education programs work with and often spring from or are part of the small-scale institutions that are a crucial part of the enduring structure of community life. These institutions, which Berger and Neuhaus (1977) have labelled "mediating structures," include the neighborhood, the church, and voluntary organizations. As these authors argue, "one of the most debilitating results of modernization is a feeling of powerlessness in the fact of institutions controlled by those whom we do not know and whose values we often do not share." (p. 7) The value of many locally-based family support and education programs in fact lies in their capacity to serve as intermediaries for families as they deal with large bureaucratic institutions such as the government and the corporation. They also provide kinds of support that are frequently not available from other agencies and professionals. Peer support for parents with children in neonatal intensive care units is a case in point. Parent support groups and peer matching efforts can provide empathic support and coping skills which busy neonatologists cannot (Boukydis, 1983). In short, in many communities, these hybrid programs have themselves become mediating structures which remake and reinforce social ties and link families to various formal and informal community services. As such, they strengthen the local community infrastructure and attune it to the needs and resources of local families.

These programs serve many kinds of families. Some serve everyone with children within a particular age range in the geographic area, others are targetted to groups considered to be at high risk because of some actual or potential child or family problem. One of the things that is clear to many who work with families is that these programs fill a real need, whether it be that of a middle class mother who just needs a place to drop in and meet and

talk with other mothers or that of a low-income teen mother who requires more intensive support and education services. There is inevitably a tension between primary prevention and intensive services for high risk groups, particularly when resources are scarce. What is necessary is a graduated set of programs available in the community; more intensive services are necessary for high risk families and as a result they cost more than some of the parent groups and the like. Both are necessary and we have to figure out how to maintain them. As more and more evidence on the effectiveness of these programs, particularly their cost effectiveness, becomes available, their contribution both to family strength and the public welfare will be increasingly apparent. (For a detailed review of the evidence on family support program effectiveness, see Weiss & Jacobs, 1984.)

Family Support and Education Programs: A Middle Ground for Family Policy?

Many of the major social policy issues of the late twentieth century center on questions about the respective roles of the family and other institutions, particularly the government, in the care of dependents. We are now at a point where it is necessary to rethink some of the arrangements of the modern welfare state; like our counterparts in Western Europe, we "are going through a renegotiation of the division of labor between institutions and individuals which adds up to a new phase of transition for industrial society." This renegotiation is raising fundamental questions about the relationship between governmental and nongovernmental provision of support to the institutions which constitute the social infrastructure--including families, communities, and the formal and informal groups at the core of civic life. Some of the most creative thinking about this renegotiation is

currently going on among the developers of grass-roots family support and education programs.

These programs recognize that contemporary families are in a paradoxical situation; they are faced with increasing stress at the same time that they are being asked to assume a larger role in the care of dependents. The steady proliferation of family support and education programs from the bottom or grass-roots up, instead of from the federal top-down, is a reflection of a more systemic reaction to this paradox and of the fundamental recognition of the increasing need to provide education and support to families, particularly those with young children, in a realigned welfare state. These programs also reflect broader national debates about social policy for families in that they have integrated two questions--what should government or community do for families and what should families do for themselves--into one: what can government and other community institutions do to enhance the family's capacity to help itself and others?

A great deal has been written about the changing American family from a variety of perspectives. Examining some of the material about how to strengthen families produced by social scientists, policy makers and others, representing both conservative and liberal perspectives, several points are evident. First, many acknowledge and argue that values, as well as evidence of program or policy effectiveness, are the standards against which to judge actual and proposed programs (Moynihan, 1985; Berger & Berger, 1984; Hobbs, Dokecki, Hoover-Dempsey, Moroney, Shayne, & Weeks, 1984; Skerry, 1983; Haskins & Adams, 1983). The comparative examination of the values that these commentators put forth as necessary undergirding for family program and policy initiatives is very instructive for three reasons:

1. It reveals that there is strong agreement on the pivotal role the family plays in child development and in the creation and maintenance of the sense of community necessary for societal survival.

2. Although the stated values are admittedly of a general nature, there is more overlap among them that might have been anticipated.

3. The values these analysts share are central to and operationalized by many of the aforementioned new breed of family support and education programs.

As such, these programs represent a common ground on which representatives of a variety of viewpoints can stand together to reinforce existing and create new family support and education programs and policies to strengthen families. Further, they may serve as starting points from which communities can begin to assess and address the needs of all their families. And in fact, they are serving as a common ground in a number of states around the country where legislators from all political persuasions are uniting around preventive family support initiatives. These state initiatives reflect the recognition that some public support from governmental and from nongovermental community institutions is necessary for these programs, and that support can serve as leverage to obtain resources from other sources.

Evidence about program effectiveness, particularly with respect to the ways in which these programs strengthen not only children but families and communities, is also important to promote. Researchers and program practitioners now have enough questions in common about the sources and

consequences of social support for families to be about to design mutually beneficial and productive action research partnerships to further knowledge, family policy, and practice. Some of the questions currently at the three-way intersection of knowledge, policy and practice include the following: "What is the relative importance of internal (to the family) versus external support for parenting (Belsky, 1984; Crnic & Greenberg, in press), and what are the implications of this for the design of family support programs--for example: Should programs be designed to support and reinforce the father's role in the family because this would significantly enhance the support available for mothers? Should support programs for teenage mothers include a component for grandmothers and/or fathers, the two most often mentioned sources of support these mothers report they have (Colletta, 1981; Crockenberg, in press)? How important are reciprocity and change to social support processes and programs? (Are programs in which parents have to give as well as receive information and support better at building parental self-esteem and competence, and in promoting informal support networks (Weiss, 1979)? What is the relationship between family functioning and social support?

As Bronfenbrenner (1984) has suggested, future 'research designs must take into account the possibility that causal processes may be operating in the reverse direction, with supportive social networks or participation in a family support program being a creation rather than a condition of constructive family functioning' (p. 43). What are the relationships between levels and sources of stress and support, and different measures of child and family development? Are there some families who are so stressed economically, emotionally, and otherwise that they do not benefit from available informal social support (Crockenberg, in press) or from formal support interventions as

now designed? Is it necessary to achieve a certain threshold whereby basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter are met before families can benefit from social support interventions? Finally, under what familial conditions does support become a source of stress? Belle (1982) has pointed out, for example, that poor single mothers' efforts to maintain a supportive social network are often a significant source of stress (Zigler, Weiss, pp. 198-199).

Richard Titmuss, a foremost analyst of social programs, has argued that social policy should promote social altruism (1970). The programs described here seem to have that potential. To test it, we should pay close attention to both the strengths and weaknesses of these programs and keep asking both what they can and cannot do. Moreover, we need to ask about their efficiency, equity, distribution, and fairness. Perhaps in this way we can reset the balance between individuals and government in a way that brings out the best in both and that respects and strengthens families and communities.

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